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# 1. Drowned in the Flood: Covenant

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# 1. Drowned in the Flood: Covenant

**1** The first adventure of the baptismal journey seems to end the journey before it has even begun!

One of my High School friends was a Mennonite Brethren lad. He was a very devout Christian, and he had a good and beneficial influence on me. His congregation practised adult Baptism, of course, but they tried seriously to imitate the Baptism of Jesus. So when the time came for my friend's Baptism, the congregation went down to the North Saskatchewan River, built a bit of a railing into the water, and there my friend was plunged into the river. It was a great and clarifying experience for him.

The railing was an important safety feature, because the current pulled at them. The river is rightly called "Saskatchewan", which is derived from the Cree name for the river, *Kakisiskatchewan Sipi*, "Swift Flowing River".<sup>1</sup> It is always rearranging its bed and its banks, piling up a wonderful sandbar one day and washing it away the next – sometimes literally from under your feet if you've been brave or foolish enough to land on it. And just a few years after his Baptism I heard the news that my friend had been bold or foolish enough to do just that, and he had drowned. Because his Baptism had meant so much to him, I cannot help but believe that, besides being on a Sunday outing, he had been revisiting the place of his Baptism, perhaps reliving it as he entered the river to swim to the sandbar. He drowned in the baptismal waters.

The baptismal journey begins precisely at the place where it ends: being drowned in a flood.

Now the earth was corrupt in God's sight, and the earth was filled with violence. And God saw that the earth was corrupt; for all flesh had corrupted its ways upon the earth. And God said to Noah, "I have determined to make an end of all flesh, for the earth is filled with violence because of them; now I am going to destroy them along with the earth. Make yourself an ark of cypress wood...."

In the six hundredth year of Noah's life, in the second month, on the seventeenth day of the month, on that day all the fountains of the great deep burst forth, and the windows of the heavens were opened. The rain fell on the earth forty days and forty nights.

The waters swelled and increased greatly on the earth; and the ark floated on the face of the waters. The waters swelled so mightily on the earth that all the high mountains under the whole heaven were covered; the waters swelled above the mountains, covering them fifteen cubits deep. And all flesh died that moved on the earth, birds, domestic animals, wild animals, all swarming creatures that swarm on the earth, and all human beings; everything on dry land in whose nostrils was the breath of life died. God blotted out every living thing that was on the face of the ground (Genesis 6:11-14a; 7:11-12, 18-22).

## 2. "I'm going to start over," says God.

"I'm going to wipe it all out!" says God. "Everything I've created. Wipe it all out. It's become lewd and perverted and offensive. Not at all what I intended. I'll wipe it all out and start again. I'll start again with the only ones who come close to what I intended, Noah, his wife, their three sons and their wives. That's it. And two of every living thing. That's all. I'll start again with just these seeds."

It is a terrible word. It is so singularly a word of judgment that Covenant has no place in it. It is the word of a holy and terrible God.

How did Israel bear to hear this awful story? How could the mothers and fathers bear to tell it to their little children? It would terrify them. They would look up with huge, frightened eyes and ask unanswerable questions: Why was God so angry? How could God be so mean as to drown all the little rabbits and the little lambs and the baby calves? How could God drown all the mamas and the babies? Is God still so angry?

How did Israel bear to hear this story?

Let's back up a bit.

## 3. You see, they knew God as the Holy and Terrible Other

That was how Israel experienced this God with whom it found itself inexplicably involved. El Shaddai was an ancient name for God (Genesis 17:1): "God Almighty", "God, the One of the Mountains". There's a

scary and exhilarating wildness in that name: "The Mountain God". Not the God of the lazing Anapolis Valley, or of placid Southern Ontario, or of the long humid inlet of the lower BC mainland. But God of the Labrador Torngats, of the dark, primordial rumple of the Shield, of the grand and inaccessible upthrust of the Rockies. God, the One of the Mountains. El Shaddai.

It didn't help much when Moses pressed God, "If I come to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?" And God says, "I AM WHO I AM". Or was it "I WILL BE WHAT I WILL BE"? Moses and Israel had to be content with that. It came out to be four consonants, YHWH. Yahweh? But they decided they'd better not even try to pronounce that, and so they settled for ADONAI meaning "Lord", or ELOHIM meaning "God". The Mountain God of the unpronounceable Name.

God had to be that way in order to get them out of Egypt. A strong hand and a mighty arm! Nothing else would get them out of Egypt! They told the story gleefully as soon as they realized they had in fact gotten away! A strong hand and a mighty arm! El Shaddai, God Almighty! God, the Holy and Terrible Other, got them out of Egypt!

And then they came to the mountain. And now it was terror upon terror. At first, "consecrate yourselves and wash your clothes, and prepare for the third day, because on the third day the LORD will come down upon the mountain" (Exodus 19:10-11). And then it was, "Don't go up to the mountain! Don't even think of touching the edge of it. Any who touch the mountain shall be put to death...stoned or shot with arrows...whether animal or human..." (19:12-13). And then trumpets and thunder and lightning and a thick cloud on the mountain, and the whole mountain shaking. El Shaddai. And then nothing but smoke and thunder for forty days with Moses gone on the mountain (Exodus 24:18). Dead for sure! If he dared go up the mountain wouldn't he be killed, too? Dead, dead!

So Aaron, make us a substitute. This God of the Mountain is too wild for us, too dangerous, too terrible. Make us a god in our image.

Aaron did. He made them a golden calf. A god in their image! This was a god they could get close to. A god with whom they could have a personal relationship. And they were just having the greatest time of



their lives with this god when El Shaddai brought Moses down. And God said to Moses, "Stand aside. Let me alone, so that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them" (Exodus 32:10). But Moses didn't stand aside. He interceded. "Don't do this," he said. "The Egyptians will hear of it and laugh. Besides, you promised. Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel...how you swore to them by your own self, 'I will multiply your descendants and give them a land'." And the LORD's mind changed (Exodus 32:11-14)--but a plague was sent among them (32:35).

It was a terrifying lesson: The Israelites couldn't get rid of this God of the Mountain with the unpronounceable Name! The LORD wouldn't leave them alone! "I'm going to live with you," the LORD said, and everybody shuddered. "So here's what you have to build...." They built the movable tabernacle, and the glory of the LORD filled it (40:34). And now they learned about the holiness of God. Clean and unclean. Aaron and his family are priestly people and the only ones who can pack up and move the tabernacle – anyone else tries it, they die. Only the priests dare make a sacrifice – any one else so much as swings a censer of incense, they die. The sabbath is holy. The festivals are holy. The Name is holy. The first fruits are holy. You are to be a holy people, because I the LORD am holy. Or else you will die.

#### **4. It was all pretty clear: They had to start over. From scratch.**

God had taken them out of Egypt. God was taking them to the Promised Land. Now they had to leave Egypt behind. That was imperative: LEAVE EGYPT BEHIND. When we get to the Promised Land we are not to recreate Egypt. God is bringing us to a new land to start all over again. So don't think Egyptian. Don't talk Egyptian. Don't dream Egyptian. Don't – for the dear Lord's sake – don't recreate Egypt in the Promised Land! Start over.

Start over. Don't have Pharaohs. Pharaohs grab up all the power and make slaves. And then they get to thinking they are gods. But I am the Lord your God; you need no others. Create new and humane ways to live together. Have a day of rest, rest for everybody, including your donkeys. Give everybody a day off work. You need it, lest you become workaholics. Take care of the widow and the orphan and the foreigners among you. Every seven years, set all your servants free, and cancel all

debts. Temper your justice with mercy. Build community by honoring your elders and sheltering the young in faithful families and helping your neighbor in good times and bad times. And make new festivals that tell the story of God and celebrate God as Creator, Redeemer, and eternal Covenanter.

You have been freed from Egypt. You are going to the Promised Land. For God's sake and your own sakes don't recreate Egypt there. Start over.

## **5. So they could understand the ancient story of the Flood.**

"The LORD saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually" (Genesis 6:5).

Time to start all over. They could understand that, because that's the way it had gone in the wilderness march. They'd come up to the border of the Promised Land and sent scouts to scout it out. And the majority of the scouts came back in despair: "It's a land that devours its inhabitants; all the people we saw in it are of great size...and we seemed like grasshoppers...." And the people cried all night, "Would that we had died in the land of Egypt...or in this wilderness...Our wives and little ones will become booty; would it not be better for us to go back to Egypt?" (Numbers 13-14). And God said, "How long will this people despise me? Step aside, Moses. I will strike them with pestilence and disinherit them. Step aside, Moses." But Moses didn't step aside. He interceded. "Don't do it," he counselled. "People of this land will hear of it and say you couldn't pull it off – you couldn't get them out of the wilderness. And anyway, you promised." So El Shaddai said, "OK. But listen up. None of the people who have seen my glory and the signs that I did...and yet have tested me these ten times and have not obeyed my voice, shall see the land that I swore to give to their ancestors; none of those who despised me shall see it" (Numbers 14). The whole generation that left Egypt died in the wilderness.

Start over. With a whole new generation. It takes at least that long to get Egypt out of our systems to make room for God's Reign.

So they understood the ancient story of the Flood. "The earth was corrupt in God's sight, and the earth was filled with violence...And God

said to Noah, 'Make yourself an ark...' (Genesis 6). Noah was not a Moses. There was no one to intercede. The Flood came, and all flesh died. Only Noah and those with him in the ark were left, bobbing on the waters (Genesis 7). It seemed God had given up on the creation business. There was no one to remind El Shaddai of the huge joy there had been in the work of creating. How like an artist paint had been flung on the cosmic canvas, how like an urgent sculptor the visions of the mind became flesh and blood realities, how like a singer grass and trees and flowers had been charmed from the earth. No one to remind El Shaddai, Creator, of the tender passion of forming something – someone – in the only image that seemed to be right.... No one to remind and to intercede.... The Flood came and all flesh died.

When we baptize we die in the Flood.

But can an artist forget her work? Can a writer forget her words? Can a sculptor forget the shaping clay? Can a singer forget her song? Start over. "God remembered Noah and all the wild animals and all the domestic animals that were with him in the ark. And God made a wind blow over the earth, and the waters subsided...In the second month, on the twenty-seventh day of the month, the earth was dry. Then God said to Noah, 'Go out of the ark...Bring out with you every living thing that is with you of all flesh...so that they may abound on the earth, and be fruitful and multiply on the earth'" (Genesis 8).

Start over. A cleansed earth. A cleansed life. Start over.

When we baptize we start over.

Out of the deep well of El Shaddai, Creator, flared a great, arcing bow. "I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you...I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth...I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth" (Genesis 9:8ff.). "As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease" (Genesis 8:22). "When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth" (9:16).

This holy and terrible God is a Covenanter! This is at once terrifying and invigorating! When we baptize we enter into covenant with this

covenanting God. When we baptize we baptize into that Covenant!

**6. Now note this carefully: The Covenant is with the whole earth and every living creature.**

God pointed to the rainbow and said to Noah, "I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth" (Genesis 9:13). When we baptize, we become part of God's covenant with the whole earth.

Surely this means that covenant is built into Creation; it is the way the world is meant to work. The First Nations understand that.

The Squamish First Nation told that, in the long ago, there were four brothers. They had great powers, and wherever they went they did good. The Squamish peoples said to them, "Often we do not have enough to eat. The salmon is good food, but they are a people who do not frequent our waters."

The brothers did not know where the salmon lived, so they snared the sun, and said, "From high in the sky you can see all over. Tell us, where do the salmon people live?" The sun pointed to the west. So next morning, accompanied by some of the Squamish people, they started westward. Far, far out they came to the land of the salmon people and beached their canoes. They presented a gift to Spring Salmon, the chief of the village, and he responded with friendship.

He sent two boys and two girls to go into the sea and swim into the salmon-trap in the stream behind the village. They drew their blankets over their heads and walked into the sea. When the water reached their faces they became salmon and swam up the stream into the fish-trap. Then Chief Spring Salmon ordered others to fetch the salmon and prepare a feast. When they sat down to eat, Chief Spring Salmon said, "Eat as much as you wish, but be very careful to save all of the bones. Do not misplace or destroy even a tiny one." Wondering about this strange advice, the visitors ate heartily. At the end of the meal some young men carefully picked up the fish bones and threw them into the sea. A few minutes later the four young people who had been sent into the sea reappeared. For four days the visitors were thus entertained.

But they became increasingly curious about saving the bones. On the fourth day one of them managed to hide some. When again the



bones were cast into the sea, the four young people re-appeared – but one of them hid his face with his hands. “I do not have bones for my cheeks and nose,” he told the Chief. At once the Chief turned stern. “Someone has mislaid some of the bones!” Hastily the visitor responsible pretended to discover them; they too were cast into the sea and the maimed youth became whole.

Some time later the oldest of the four brothers stated the purpose of their visit to the Salmon Chief, asking that some of the salmon people be sent to visit Squamish waters. “They are poor. Often they are hungry. If your people sometimes came to visit them, they would be ever so grateful.”

The Salmon Chief agreed on condition that all the bones would be meticulously cast back into the water, for then the fish that had been caught and eaten would be reconstituted and return again to the Salmon people’s village. Upon the promise to do so, the Salmon chief announced that he would send, in turn, the Spring Salmon, the Sockeye, the Cohoe, the dog-Salmon, and then the Humpback.

And so, season after season, in that order, the salmon people came to Squamish waters. And the Squamish were always very careful to throw the bones back into the water.<sup>2</sup>

Covenant is the way Creation is meant to work.

## **7. Perhaps what this means is that we become Covenant makers ourselves.**

Think about that a bit. Covenant makers deliberately move in and live with. They tabernacle with the earth and its creatures. Not to lord it over the earth, but to restore its true image. And covenant makers hang in there. Commitment of so astonishing a degree that it will not only pick up a falling-down drunk Noah but pick up a wilting leaf and cleanse a dead river and listen for all the morning stars singing. Covenant makers learn to live with and for the whole Creation, even as God lives with and for the whole Creation.

So we are walking Covenants. We’d better face up front that this can be a costly way to go. Stepping out of the Covenant leads to disfiguration: we distort the image of God. The salmon are now coming reluctantly; there is fear they may cease coming. When they do come, many

are maimed from chemical effluent. Many are blinded by eroded silt. And we are diminished too, by greed and competition and isolation, disfigured by hunger and abuse and injustice. Stepping out of the Covenant leads to disfiguration. The Flood story, we can see now, tells us that, too.

But we are baptized. Walking covenants, walking with the Covenanter. We are moments of starting over.

And it is none too soon. It is said the sea level is rising again. Be very careful with the bones.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Deanna Christensen and Menno Fieguth, *Historic Saskatchewan* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1986) 9.
- <sup>2</sup> This account is a rather skimpy summary of what is a much longer story, "Why the Salmon come to Squamish Waters," recorded by Ella Elizabeth Clark, *Indian Legends of Canada* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1960) 29-32. The story articulates a profound concept in North American Native religion, namely, that of the "Animal Owner" or "Animal Guardian" or "Animal Master/Ruler" or even "Animal Elder". Ake Hultkrantz defines this mythic being "as a supernatural ruler whose function is to exercise stewardship over the wild animals, especially the animals which are hunted by man. He protects these animals, sees to it that if they have been slain by man, they get a correct ritual burial, and sanctions or prevents the hunter's slaying of them" ("The Owner of the Animals in the Religion of the North American Indians," *Belief and Worship in Native North America*, Syracuse University Press, 1981, chap. 8, 136f.). Human beings are considered excessively weak and needy, and the Animal Ruler typically out of pity enters "into covenant" with humans, agreeing to surrender his species to them for food, clothing, and shelter, in return for which humans pledge themselves to grateful and respectful practices and to the carrying out of the all-important rituals which will reconstitute slain animals to life again. Failure to live up to the conditions of the covenant will cause the Animal Ruler to withhold the species from people, precipitating starvation and related disasters.